

POLITICS & POLICY

The GOP's myth of an 'open border'

The U.S. borders are guarded by a vast and well-funded national security agency that has grown far larger and more powerful in recent years.



— Immigrants are processed by the U.S. Border Patrol after crossing the border from Mexico in Yuma, Ariz. on Aug. 19, 2022. Qian Weizhong / VCG via Getty Images file

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By Debu Gandhi, senior director of Immigration Policy at the Center for American Progress Action Fund

The news cycle has been dominated by Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' recent use of **appropriated state funds to fly Venezuelan migrants from Texas to Martha's Vineyard,**

Massachusetts, essentially using the asylum-seekers as pawns to make a political statement about immigration. His action is being examined for violating Florida law, is already the subject of at least one criminal investigation, and has resulted in a federal lawsuit alleging that he orchestrated a premeditated, fraudulent and illegal scheme.

One would think that those perpetuating the “open border” myth would be eager to seize every opportunity to strengthen border security.

Whether or not DeSantis' stunt is found to have violated the law, it was cruel and dehumanizing. This action – and similar ones orchestrated by other GOP governors – have also deliberately elevated the “open border” narrative, which falsely represents that unlawful immigrants are waltzing into the U.S. through a porous southern border in droves. The purported lawless and open border has been the main justification cited by DeSantis and other GOP governors, who have doubled down on their decision to transport migrants to prominent locations with Democratic elected officials – even though the GOP governors have deliberately made no attempt to coordinate these transfers.

Contrary to the “open border” myth, U.S. borders are guarded by a vast and well-funded national security agency that has grown far larger and more powerful in recent years. Since 2001, U.S. Border Patrol has nearly doubled in capacity, from fewer than 10,000 agents to now more than 19,500. The Biden administration has requested \$97.3 billion in funding for the Department of Homeland Security for fiscal year 2023, including billions of dollars for border security and interior immigration enforcement.



— Migrants attempting to cross in to the United States from Mexico are detained by U.S. Customs and Border Protection at the border in San Luis, Ariz. on Aug. 20, 2022. Nick Ut / Getty Images file

One would think that those perpetuating the “open border” myth would be eager to seize every opportunity to strengthen border security. Last year, however, a large majority of congressional Republicans voted **against the bipartisan infrastructure bill**, which **provided billions of dollars to strengthen border security, among other investments in critical infrastructure**.

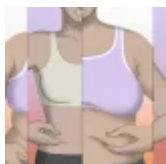
This year, most Senate Republicans voted **not to fund the government**, thereby choosing not to vote for even 1 cent for the **Transportation Security Administration, Customs and Border Protection, and also Immigration and Customs Enforcement**. The 2022 omnibus appropriations bill not only funded the nation’s border security, but it also had Federal Emergency Management Agency funds for food and shelter to help border communities manage migration. Ultimately, the “no” votes by the majority of Senate Republicans for investing in infrastructure and funding the federal government were overcome, and these massive investments in border security enhancements were signed into law by President Joe Biden.

Put simply, U.S. borders under this administration do not lack security. Thousands of law enforcement personnel bolstered by billions of dollars in technology infrastructure patrol the northern and the southern borders. Furthermore, U.S. borders are not “open” because the Biden administration is processing asylum-seekers, as it is obligated to do **under long-standing, bipartisan laws**.

Additionally, the Biden administration has, in fact, drastically limited the opportunity to apply for asylum for many migrants at the border by continuing the controversial usage of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Title 42 public health authorities initiated under the Trump administration in response to the pandemic. As a result, the administration has **carried out more than 1 million expulsions in the first 11 months of this fiscal year, on top of the million-plus expulsions conducted during the previous fiscal year**. An attempt to end this policy earlier this year has been **tied up in litigation**, so the use of Title 42 **continues** at present. But when it ends, the borders will not suddenly be “open” – rather, the Title 42 system will be replaced by the expanded application of Title 8 proceedings that were in place at the border before Covid and **which can bring criminal charges for repeated improper entries**, thus further adding to the administration’s border enforcement capabilities.

Characterizing the humanitarian challenge at the southern border as a solely U.S. “open border” problem also presents an inaccurate picture of the global forced displacement crisis. In fact, there are currently **more forcibly displaced people on record worldwide than ever before**. Sheltering them and processing their protection claims are national, regional and global challenges. The entire region of the Americas – not just the United States – is impacted by this vast displacement. For instance, according to the United Nations refugee agency, **there are more than 6 million displaced Venezuelans who have fled violence and insecurity, as well as a lack of food and medicine**. Yet only a limited percentage have come to the U.S. border; **most are still in the region, with millions being hosted in countries such as Colombia**.

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The Biden administration is actively **working with countries in the region to manage the root causes of migration** and improve coordination and protections for migrants. On the law enforcement side, **DHS and the Justice Department have launched a major international effort to disrupt human smuggling operations**, resulting in arrests, drug seizures and criminal prosecutions.

Ultimately, the solutions to comprehensively fix the badly broken immigration system must come from Congress. However, in recent years, notwithstanding the urgent need for immigration reform, many “MAGA” extremists have embraced former President Donald Trump’s rhetoric of invasion, “**open borders**” and restrictionist immigration policies. The legacy of this damaging brand of immigration politics has bolstered many right-wing **attacks on immigration reform**.

Gov. DeSantis is not solving a problem, it is not a solution: WH press secretary



The last major overhaul of the immigration system to legalize undocumented immigrants **took place in 1986**. Two decades later, bipartisan reform efforts supported by then-President George W. Bush failed, mainly **due to opposition from congressional Republicans**. Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s 2012 loss to President Barack Obama, preceded by Romney’s call for self-deportation of undocumented immigrants, led to **condemnation of his remarks from the Republican National Committee chairman** and an “**autopsy**” report by the RNC calling on Republicans to back comprehensive immigration reform. After the report, 14 Senate

Republicans joined all Senate Democrats to pass a **landmark, bipartisan, comprehensive immigration reform bill** in 2013. However, the House Republican leadership **never took up the Senate bill**.

Republicans failed to unite on immigration reform during the Trump administration, as well. In 2018, the Senate tried earnestly – yet failed – to pass bipartisan immigration reform. One proposal centered on **protecting “Dreamers” and acceding to Trump’s border wall wish**. Trump’s own plan **received the fewest votes**. From the very beginning of the current Congress, **Republicans showed little interest** in working with the Biden administration on its immigration reform proposals.

Immigrants are playing a vital role in our nation’s recovery from the Covid pandemic – and passing immigration reform would boost economic growth and create new jobs. Divisive, anti-immigration “MAGA” extremism ignores this reality. Last year, a **study from the Center for American Progress** found that providing a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants would bring significant benefits to the entire U.S. economy, boosting the national gross domestic product by \$1.7 trillion and creating 438,800 new jobs over the next decade.

The myth of “open borders” will persist in perpetuity for those who wish to find every way to get to a “no” vote on any kind of meaningful immigration reform. But progressive legislative action is needed more with each passing year. It’s time for Congress to debunk the “open borders” myth and act on a bipartisan basis to fix our broken immigration system.

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